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ABSTRACT

Two studies were undertaken to obtain information about the communication behavior of older and newer organizations. In the first study, data were collected from 216 organizations in the Washington, D.C./Baltimore, Maryland, area that had designated public relations specialists. Among other factors, data were collected on the frequency with which certain public relations activities were performed and the age of the organization. The second study sought similar data from 20 of the top 50 private and quasiprivate organizations in the same area. The year of the organization's founding was used to cluster the organizations into those which were older (dating to the turn of the century) and those newer (dating no further back than 1930). Results indicated that older organizations more often produced an employee publication, wrote more press releases, spent more time maintaining contacts with the media, and engaged in more formal and informal research and evaluation than did newer firms. These findings support the notion that organizations evolve over time into more sophisticated information processing systems. (DF)

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THEORY BUILDING IN PUBLIC RELATIONS: GOING BEYOND OPEN SYSTEMS MODELS

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Ivy Lee, who some call the father of public relations, helped form the original tenets of public relations by citing case studies of when public relations techniques worked. In the early decades of this century, case studies were appropriate ways to describe the state of public relations because the environment was fairly predictable--the marketplace was not saturated with goods and services, the labor pool was fairly large and unorganized, and ideologies at the time (Social Darwinism, Spenser, et. al.) supported a "public be damned" attitude. Although external and internal publics were considered by the early practitioners, they were primarily concerned with putting out information, with affecting public perceptions of organizational behavior; very little attention was given to monitoring the environment and getting that information to decision-makers. Although the founders of public relations emphasized environmental factors, their concept of an organization's environment was narrowly defined. This narrow definiton continues to restrict theory building and our understanding of public relations today.

With the advent of the human relations school of management and on into the 1950's, a new development in research methodology --the experimental and quasi-experimental comparative approach--was

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used to analyze multiple groups, organizations and publics. In the communication field, these studies often tried to find out who said what to whom with what effect.[1] Most of the empirical research of interest to public relations specialists in the 1940s and 1950s focused on interpersonal and mass communication.[2]

Along with the diffusion of general systems theories in the social sciences in the 1960s, there was an increase in the number of comparative studies of organizational behavior that used the organization as the unit of analysis. This is the newest stage in the development of literature on organizational boundary spanning activities.[3] Several studies about public relations today apply these multivariate techniques.[4] However, much of the research and theory building being done today in organizational behavior, including that in public relations, has been restricted by the definition of an open system.

All communication--including organizational communication--is system specific: the entities involved in communication (the sharing of meaning) constitute a system. Most researchers today recognize this by assuming in their analysis that organizations are open systems--dynamic transformational processes with definite inputs and outputs affected by a changing environment. Most theories constructed today about organizations and public relations are based on these notions; and the result has been system specific theories. However, for organizational science to develop, we need

to use concepts that will help us build universal laws of organizational behavior. Some might argue that it is impossible to construct universal laws or megatheories derived from subjectively based measurement of social behavior on earth in the 20th century; and there is merit to this argument. Certainly if we continue to view organizations as simple input-output processes, using the narrowly defined open-system concept, we will not be able to generalize our understanding of public relations beyond our immediate place in time and space.

Most management specialists and researchers today are interested in practical ways of explaining and predicting organizational behavior--primarily as it is practiced in post-industrial societies, principly in the United States and allied nations.[5] While this applied interest in organizational research is understandable and should be encouraged, there is a need to use concepts and specify relationships about organizations that cut across as many different situations and conditions as possible--to identify universal factors, if possible, that can be used to explain and predict organizational behavior.

Certainly we cannot do this with seat-of-the-pants case studies, no matter how valuable they may be to a particular organization, for they cannot be generalized to large sets of organizations, much less to the "sets of sets" of organizations and peoples that populate current models of organizational behavior.[6] General system theories of evolution and ecodynamics offer concepts of system behavior that can be applied to public relations, with

the possibility of helping to identify more generalizable laws of organizational behavior.[7]

The purpose of this paper is to analyze one correlate of public relations--organizational age--and to discuss the new set of research questions posed about public relations and organizational behavior by general systems theories. The central theme of general systems theories is that forces and conditions affecting one system also affect other systems, that there may be universal factors affecting all systems, that forces and conditions affecting subatomic particles may also affect biological systems, social organizations and all levels of universal existence.

According to general systems theories, such factors as organizational growth and "reproduction," information storage and retrieval, and organizational decision making are "noogenetic" factors, capable of influencing behavior much in the same way as biogenetic factors. According to Kenneth Boulding and others, organizations and other social institutions generate "genetic" pools of information and blueprints for structuring and organizing society.[8]

According to this blueprinting or noogenetic theory, if all the sparrows in the world were suddenly wiped out except for a few along the east coast of the United States, eventually the sparrows would reproduce and would take out across the world with all their special traits intact, with only a few new traits emerging as a result of the opportunities or dangers in the new environment.

So it would be with organizations, according to general systems theories: if all multinational corporations suddenly ceased

to exist--even if all the organizations in the world were wiped out--except those on the east coast of the United States, eventually the organizations would grow and spread their influence and reproduce, possibly making a few adjustments as a result of the new opportunities and dangers in the world. Organizations as living social systems are capable of reproducing themselves; they are not the simple input-output mechanisms of the open system theories.

Systems can be described as fitting one or more of nine levels of complexity.[9] At Level 1 are frameworks: static descriptions of systems; a good example is an organizational chart. At Level 2 are systems that work like clockwork: closed systems operating in a predictable economy, or the diffusion process within an established communication network. At Level 3 are control systems operating like clockwork but with more feedback and flow of information than at Level 2; for example, economic cycles in a centrally planned economy.

At Level 4 are open systems, where the systems interact with the environment, and through uncertainly absorption, grow; or failing to absorb more energy than expended, become overwhelmed by the environment and miss opportunities or run into difficulties and are destroyed or die. The open system concept as described here applies to chemical or physical systems such as fire and to living systems such as human cells. The key distinction of an open system is that it grows by simultaneous duplication of conditions; for example, spontaneous combustion or cell division. This concept of an open system falls short of describing an organization.

Beyond open systems are what Boulding calls "blueprinted growth systems." These are rule-generative systems, where growth is not through duplication but by producing a set of preprogrammed instructions on how to develop anew. An example of a blueprinted growth system is Chomsky's transformational analysis of grammar, where he argues that at a biological level, within the genetic code, certain "deep structures" of language are preprogrammed into human behavior. Another example is sociobiology, with its recognition that many cognitive states are linked to biological states, and are probably linked to the genetic make-up of the individual.[10]

At Level 6, systems are more complex because they are more aware of the environment. Level 6 systems have developed organized means for information storage and retrieval; yet they do not have an active self-awareness. A good example here is a person responding out of habit or an organization that has forgotten why certain rules are followed; these are sophisticated information processing systems but they do not abstract or generalize from this information. At Level 7, a system is actively conscious of itself--it has an image of itself and works at maintaining that image. A system at this level of complexity develops a rich and sometimes unique language. Groups of people aware of their group membership--in other words, publics--are good examples of Level 7 systems.

At Level 8, systems have all the qualities of the previous levels plus they have multiple decision-making centers, with a shared value system, history, and culture. Publics and groups do not have these traits, certainly individuals dont; but, many

organizations are at this stage of development, and certainly nation states and civilizations have these traits. Organizations at Level 8 are best described with population ecology models that focus on the network of relationships between decision-making centers both within and outside the organization's boundries. At this level, organizations are living social systems, seeking to identify opportunities and to realize their potential, with a self-awareness focused on roles and not individuals, and with the awareness that the life of the system may well be longer than the lives of the people who make up the system.

Boulding identifies one more level of system complexity, a level at which there are systems of unspecified complexity. This assumes that our current concepts of general systems adequately describe existing systems but new levels of system complexity may evolve. Level 9 systems have yet to be identified, but they may well occur and be recognized in the future.

Most of the research that has been done about public relations has been at the first three or four levels of system complexity. Early theories about communication and early principles of public relations were based on closed-system analyses of organizations--describing organizations as fairly static entities or as simple clockworks with the communications process being described as fairly predictable from sender to receiver. Today, more complexities are considered, and organizations and communication processes are analyzed with more attention to situational factors and to moderating and intervening variables. Yet, important questions about

organizations as living systems have been ignored: How do organizations reproduce themselves? How and why do they die? How do they develop shared symbols and languages? How do they grow and mature? What affect does an organization's age have on its behavior?

TWO STUDIES

To partially answer this last question, two data sets were analyzed. The analyses assumes that the organizations studied have well-developed languages and communication networks. It was postulated that organizational longevity is positively related to language development and institutionalization of boundary spanning activities, specifically public relations practices. Hence, it was hypothesized that more established organizations will have more established employee publications and will have more formal and informal ties with key publics and, overall, will engage in more two-way communication (meaning they will do more research on public opinion) than younger, newly established organizations.

The first data set consisted of 216 organizations with designated public relations specialists in the Washington, D.C.-Baltimore area.[11] Among other factors, data was collected on the frequency of performing certain public relations activities and the age of the organization. To identify trends, the measures of frequency were converted to flogs, nonparametric statistics developed by Tukey, and then compared over time. Flogs are logarithm reexpressions of fractions transformed into pluralities.[12] To calculate a flog, one side of a fraction is folded

metaphorically onto the other side to determine the difference or degree of plurality. If f is the fraction of interest, a plurality equals f minus (1-f). Such a folded fraction has a scale of zero when f=1/2. As an example, if more than 50% respond one way, the flog has a positive sign; if less than 50%, the flog has a negative sign.

FINDINGS OF FIRST STUDY

Table 1 shows the flogs of the frequency with which certain public relations activities were performed by these 216 organizations. The flogs indicate the ratio of organizations which engaged in these activities "often" to those which engaged in these activities "sometimes," "rarely," and "never." The fraction of interest was those organizations which said they performed these activities often. The organizations were clustered into age groups so that the flogs could be plotted over time. Figure 1 graphically indicates a trend for older organizations to place more emphasis on creating institutional ads, maintaining contacts with media representatives, writing press releases and producing video and other audio-visual materials. Table 2 indicates that correlation coefficients for these factors and organizational age are significant. Not readily apparent in Figure 1 is the overall negative relationship between video production and organizational age, which is highlighted in Table 2. A closer look at Figure 1 indicates that the emphasis on video production steadily declines the older an organization becomes, until around 50 years of age, there is much more concern about video production and other audio-visual materials.

Figure 2 plots the flogs for the other public relations activities listed in Table 1. The Pearson correlation coefficients between these factors and organizational age are not significant in that they might have occurred by chance alone. However, an important trend might be apparent in this floggram: across the board, there is an apparent decline in emphasis on these activities by organizations established 30 to 40 years ago. Also apparent from this data set is that all the organizations place little emphasis on established research and evaluation.

SECOND STUDY

To further explore these trends and relationships, a second data set was analyzed. Original data was collected from 20 of the top 50 private and quasi-private organizations in the Washington, D.C. area in the fall of 1978.[13] Among other factors, data was collected on the frequency of performing the same set of public relations activities measured in the first data set. The exact year the organization was established was used to cluster the 20 organizations into two groups--those established at the turn of the century or earlier, and those established from the late 1930s to the present day. Table 3 shows the flogs of public relations activities for these "old" and "young" organizations. Figure 3 illustrates the similarities and differences between these two groups.

Two trends apparent in the first data set are not seen in the second data set: Figure 3 shows that younger organizations in the second data set are more likely to emphasize preparing institutional ads than the older organizations; and, the older organizations

are more likely to emphasize video production than are the younger organizations.

One major trend in the first data set is seen again in the second data set: older organizations place more emphasis on writing press releases. Young and old organizations in the second data set did not differ greatly in the amount of emphasis they placed on contacting media representatives. But, it is apparent that older organizations in this sample engage in more research and evaluation and place more emphasis on employee communications and company publications.

To further explore trends concerning organizational age and emphasis on employee publications, data was analyzed about the structure and operation of each of the 20 organization's employee publication. Table 4 gives the descriptive statistics for young and old organizations and how they operate their employee publications. It is apparent that older organizations have more sophisticated and possibly more efficient employee publications than younger organizations. For both young and old organizations, editors spend less than five percent of their time actually collecting information to go into the publication. Older organizations recognize more sources of news for the employee publications and are more likely to use stringers for the publication. Older organizations have on an average one more person in their public relations department and require one more management "sign off" for employee publication copy than do younger organizations; yet, younger organizations take as much as a half day more to get their employee publication

approved by management. This may indicate that older organizations are more efficient at administering employee publications than are younger organizations. Another indication of the older organization's greater emphasis on employee communication is that most editors read on the average two more professional journals than do the younger organization's editors. The younger organizations do spend more on their publications (49¢ compared to 31¢ per copy); yet, this may also indicate that older organizations are more efficient in the way they run their employee publication.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis here has focused on two sets of organizations. One data set was collected in the early 70s, the other in the late 1970s, both in and around the nation's capital. Both sets of organizations were purposeful samples, so findings cannot be generalized directly to other sets of organizations; however, the fact that there are similar findings in the two sets of data increases the validity of the findings.

The major conclusion of this analysis is that an organization's age does have an impact on its public relations. For both data sets, older organizations were found to more often put out an employee publication and to spend more time writing press releases. Older organizations were seen in one data set to spend more time maintaining contacts with the media and were more likely to engage in formal and informal research and evaluation. These findings support the notion that organizations mature or evolve over time

into more sophisticated information processing systems. Old age for organizations need not necessarily be associated with old ways of conducting public relations. The older organization, by definition, has learned to survive, has learned how to maintain slack resources for continued growth, has learned how to appreciate and nurture its own language and communication system to its own advantage.

These findings are consistent with the earlier analysis by Grunig of these 216 organizations, when it was first reported that there was a more positive correlation between age and problem-solving behavior than between age and more fatalistic organizational behavior. Problem-solving organizations are more likely to engage in two-way public relations, giving out lots of information via press releases and employee publications, but more importantly, actively seeking out and monitoring public opinions by engaging in formal and informal research and evaluation.

These findings probably have raised more questions than they have answered. Not only for the sets of organizations studied here--but for any organization being studied--we need to know what environmental factors were operating at the time the organization originally received its blueprinted instructions to begin organizing and which of these factors continues to affect the organization. For example, why was there a decline in emphasis in certain public relations activities for all organizations established during the time of World War II? What is it about the cohort of organizations that makes it less likely to emphasize certain public relations activities? Unfortunately, the research designs used to collect the data analysed

here did not take into consideration all factors operating on the organizations as living social systems; consequently, this trend apparent in the first data set cannot be analyzed further. Additional research will have to be conducted to see if this trend is apparent in other data sets; but, more importantly, additional research design considerations will have to be made to collect data appropriate for a general system analysis of organizational behavior.

General systems theories raise a number of important questions about public relations that are not raised by the more traditional open-system approach to organizational behavior. How do organizations develop languages and communication systems? How does an organization go about learning? How do organizations reproduce themselves? How do organizations grow and mature? How and why do they die? What happens to an organization after it has died?

Partial answers have been given here to the question about what happens to an organization's public relations as the organization gets older. However, they are partial, tentative answers; for, the research designs used to collect the data did not take into consideration all factors which are operating on organizations as living systems. To fully test general systems theories of organizational behavior, data needs to be collected at each level of system complexity. Otherwise the level of analysis is restricted to the level of system complexity that has been measured. Although many theories about public relations are at the open system level of complexity, most of the research data has been collected at the control system, clockwork or even framework level of complexity. Surveys of

organizational members taken at one point in time are useful for describing frameworks or at best clockworks. This criticism applies to the two data sets analyzed here. Environmental factors plus organizational factors need to be measured by a variety of techniques at a variety of system levels and over time for us to be able to eliminate alternative explanations for specific system behaviors.

If a researcher assumes prior to conducting organizational research that the most important influences operate on one specific system level, then the researcher can collect the data and make the analysis, but, alternative levels and their influence cannot be considered. Most research in public relations today uses this "most similar systems design" approach.[14] Assumptions are made that organizations do not have cognitive states, that they do not think, that they represent the aggregate rationality of the people who make up the organization, and questions about languages and organizational learning patterns are ignored.

The goal of a "most different systems design" would be to collect data at the lowest possible system level and at all higher levels, and then to determine whether relationships at the micro levels are influenced by factors operating at higher levels. To fully test general systems theories of organizational behavior, data would need to be collected about the individuals working within and outside the organization, about groups within and outside the organization, about publics inside and outside the organization, about other organizations and social and economic forces operating on the system-- and not at one point in time or in

one locale, but over time and in as many locations as is possible. Only by collecting data at all system levels at a variety of different times and places will it be possible to take full advantage of the general system approach to the analysis of public relations.

Regardless of the methodological difficulties of conducting this kind of research, the concepts of general systems and ecodynamics are extremely useful in analyzing organizational behavior. If our knowledge of public relations is to grow, we must move beyond our limited notion of an organization as only an open system and recognize that many organizations and social systems have lives of their own and are a natural evolutionary development in the layers of systems within systems that we call our universe.

TABLE 1. Flogs of public relations activities over time.

Activity Age:	10	10-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	50+
Publications	.76	1.05	.79	.38	.95	.69
Counseling . management	.12	.27	0	- .12	0	- .06
Institutional ads	-1.47	- .87	-1.22	- .76	-1.74	.06
Media contacts	- .95	-1.1	-1.37	-1.16	-1.0	.02
Writing releases	- .91	-1.0	-1.1	-1.05	-1.16	- .12
Video production	- .76	- .79	-1.05	-1.16	-1.59	- .16
Informal research	- .18	- .52	- .55	-1.0	- .55	- .47
Informal evaluation	- .18	- .35	- .35	-1.0	- .4	- .47
Formal evaluations	-1.19	- .76	-1.22	-2.76	-1.0	-1.16
Formal research	-1.05	-1.26	-4.6	-1.59	-1.37	-1.33
N=	34	27	24	25	16	90

FIGURE 1. Flows of public relations activities over time.

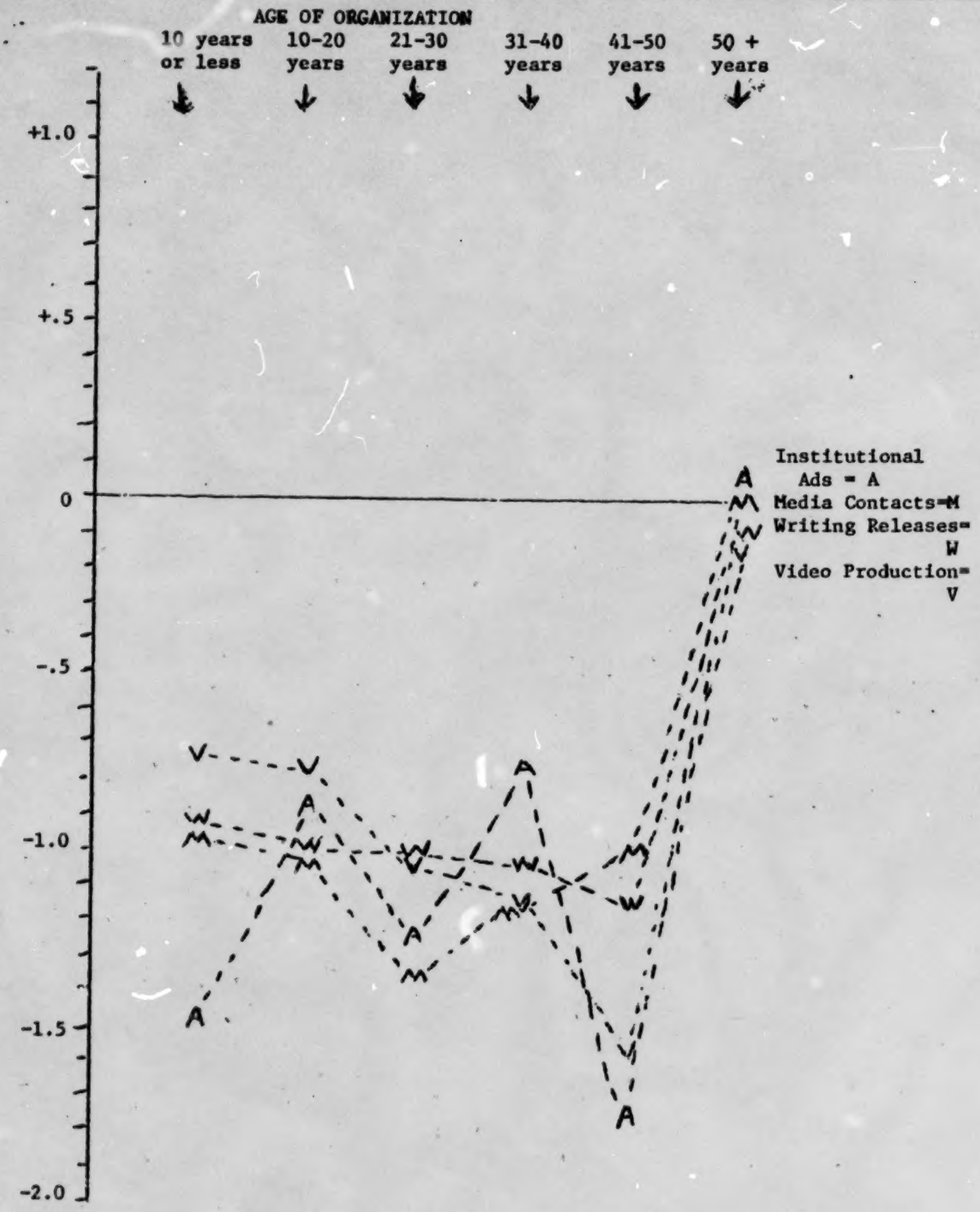


TABLE 4. Descriptive statistics for employee publications of old and young organizations.

Specific activity/trait	Old (N=9)	Young (N=11)
Percent of editor's time gathering information	3.6	4.2
Percent who use stringers	67	55
Perceived number of news sources	4.3	2.75
Size of public relations staff	2.4	1.5
Number of managers who "sign off" on copy	3.4	2.6
Number of working days to get copy approved	1	1.4
Number of professional journals read by editor	5.5	3
Years of education (editor)	16.1	15.7
Percent who do no research on publication effectiveness	0	10
Average circulation	8,475	4,655
Number of target audiences	4.1	3.9
Average cost per single copy	31¢	49¢
Percent distributed internally	44	54
Percent mailed to home	44	27

TABLE 3. Flogs of public relations activities for young and old organizations.

Activity	Young (N=9)	Old (N=11)
Publications	-.76	1.05
Counseling management	.76	1.05
Institutional ads	-1.0	-1.05
Media contacts	.50	.35
Writing releases	.50	4.61*
Video production	-1.16	.63
Informal research	-1.16	-.12
Informal evaluation	-.76	.35
Formal evaluation	-1.16	1.05
Formal research	-1.16	1.05

TABLE 2. Pearson correlation coefficients for organizational age and public relations activities.

Activity	Pearson r correlation coefficient
Publications	- .06
Counseling management	- .07
Preparing institutional advertisements	.12**
Informal contacts with the media	.15***
Writing press releases	.16***
Video production and other AV materials	- .09*
Informal research	- .07
Informal evaluations	- .02
Formal evalations	.05
Formal research	.03

* P < .10
** P < .05
*** P < .01

FIGURE 2. Flogs of public relations activities over time.

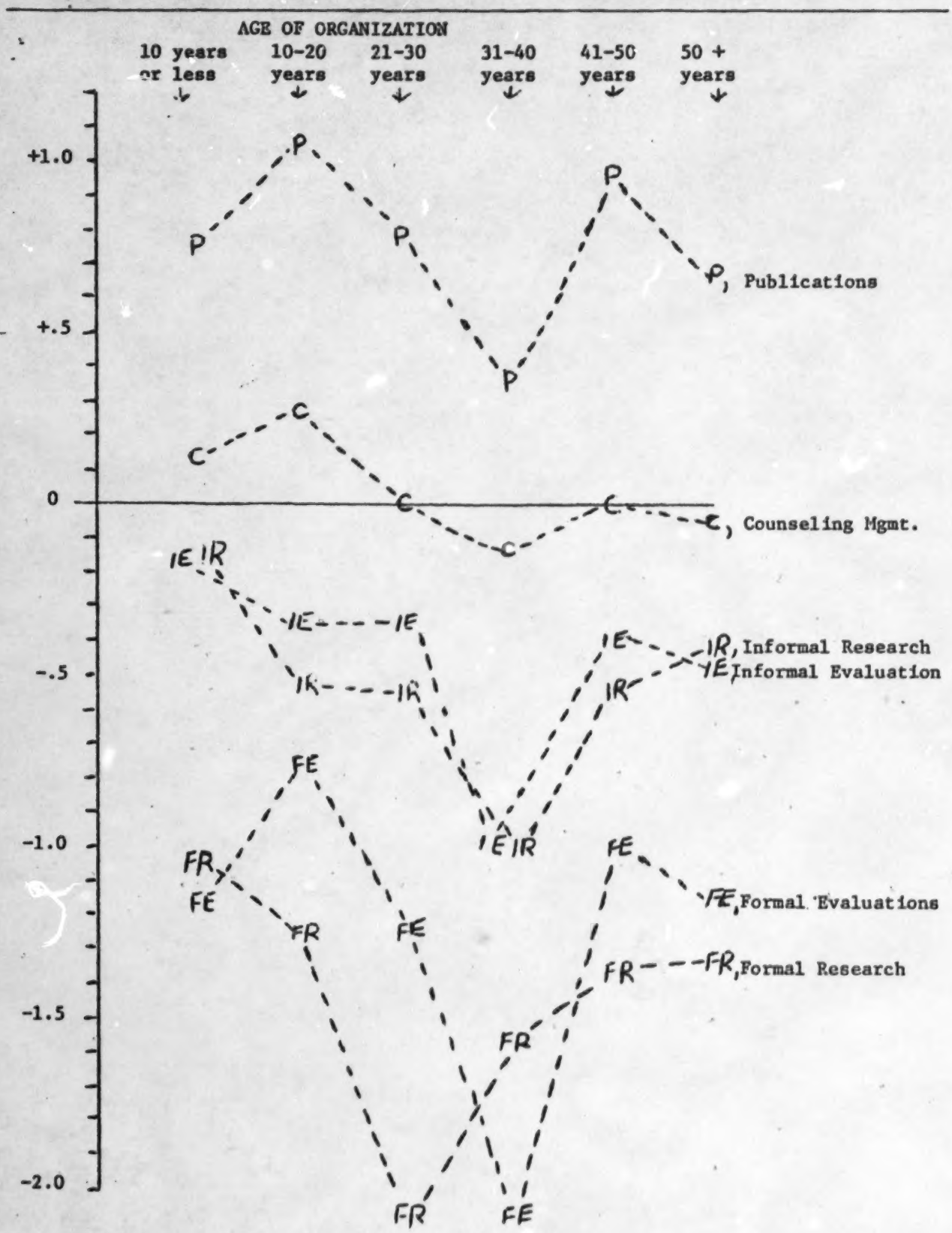
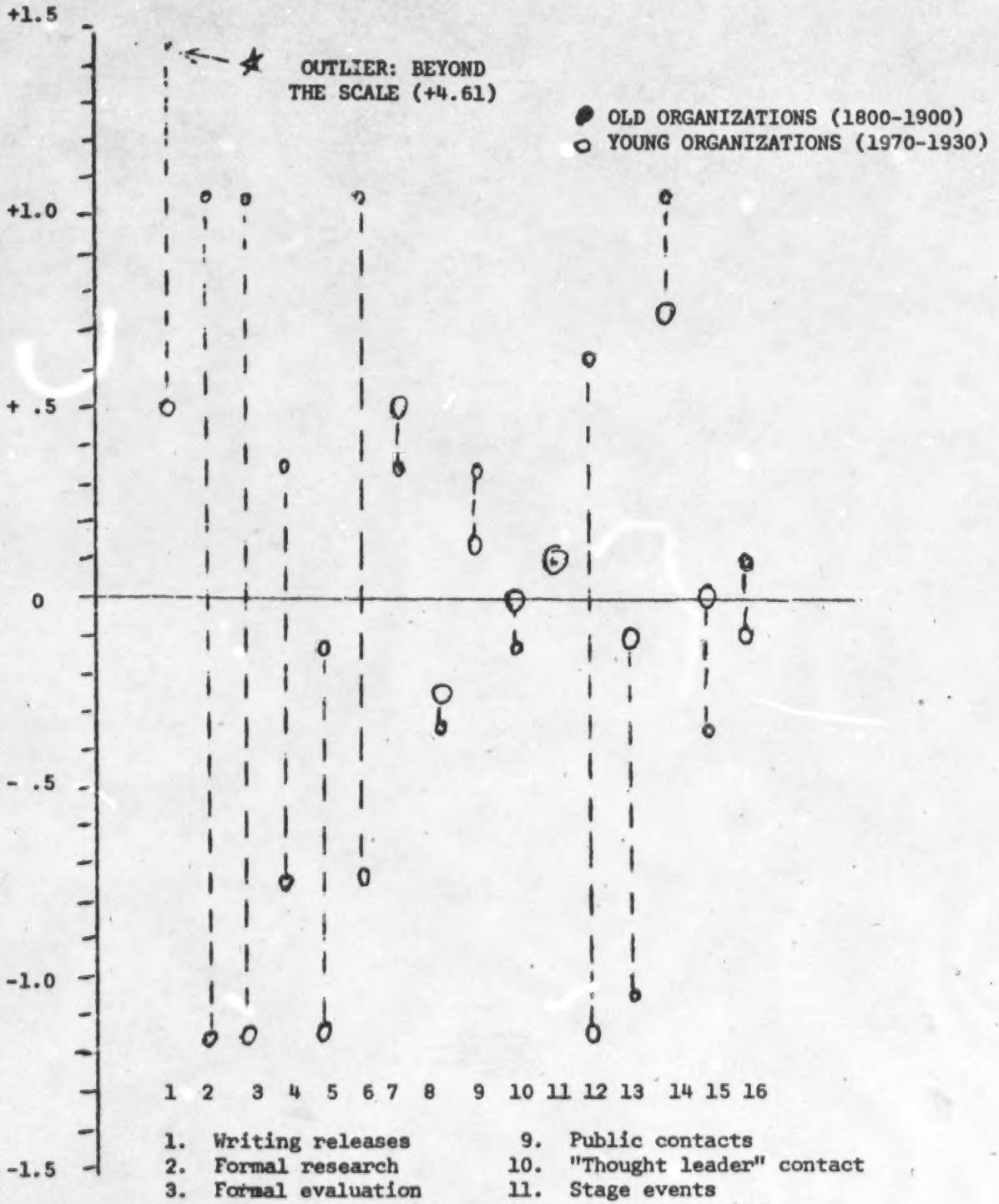


FIGURE 3. Flogs of public relations activities for young and old organizations.



1. Writing releases
2. Formal research
3. Formal evaluation
4. Informal evaluation
5. Informal research
6. Publications
7. Media contacts
8. Media contacts
9. Public contacts
10. "Thought leader" contact
11. Stage events
12. Video production
13. Institutional ads
14. Counseling management
15. Lobbying
16. Writing speeches

8. See Ecodynamics by Kenneth E. Boulding (Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications, 1978).

9. See a similar description of these levels in Pondy, op. cit.

10. See Language and Mind by Norman Chomsky (New York: Basic Books, 1972); On Aggression by Konrad Lorenz (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966); and, The Territorial Imperative by Robert Ardrey (New York: Atheneum, 1966).

11. This data set was originally analyzed in Organizations and Public Relations: Testing a Communication Theory by James E. Grunig, Journalism Monographs No. 46, November, 1976.

12. See Exploratory Data Analysis by John Tukey (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1977), specifically chapter 15 for a discussion of flogs.

13. The organizations were identified from a Washington Post annual survey of the top 50 corporations in the area.

14. See The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry by Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune (New York: Wiley Interscience, 1970).

FOOTNOTES

1. An appropriate overview of this literature is in The Process and Effects of Mass Communication, edited by Wilbur Schramm and Donald Roberts (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

2. See "An evaluation of academic research in public relations," by James E. Grunig and Ronald H. Hickson, Public Relations Review, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring, 1976.

3. A good integration of this literature is found in Organizations and Environments, by Howard E. Aldrich (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979).

4. See "A simultaneous equation model for intervention in communication behavior," by James E. Grunig, paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, August, 1979; "Coorientational measurement of public issues," by Glen M. Broom, Public Relations Review, Vol. 3, No. 4, Winter, 1977; "The changing role of public relations in business firms," by Richard W. Skinner and William L. Shanklin, Public Relations Review, Vol. 4, No. 2, Summer, 1978; also, "Towards theory-building in public relations," by Mark P. McElreath, Public Relations Review, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring, 1976.

5. Not only is most organizational research restricted to post-industrial, American or Western organizations, much of this research is focused on just the big organizations, the organizations with the most clout in our society; those large organizations may constitute no more than 10 percent of all forms of organizations. Very little is known about the more prevalent form of organization, the small organization with a couple of dozen people working together to achieve a common goal.

6. See Environments and Organizations by Marshall W. Meyer and associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978); and Chapter 6 in Complex Organizations by Charles Perrow (Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman, 1979).

7. See System Theory in the Social Sciences, edited by Hartmut Bossel, et.al. (Birkhauser Verlag, Basel und Stuttgart, 1976); also, "Beyond open system models of organization," by Louise R. Pondy and Ian I. Mitroff, in Research in Organizational Behavior, edited by Barry M. Staw (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1979).